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SUBJECT: LEADERSHIP IN THE ORTHODOX WORLD: THE ECUMENICAL
PATRIARCH AND RUSSIAN COMPETITION

Classified By: Consul General David L. Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b)
and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Though divided among many national churches, all Orthodox leaders except the Russian Orthodox recognize the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul, Bartholomew II, as first among equals. Located in "The Second Rome," the Ecumenical Patriarch traces a line of succession back to St. Andrew and, later, the conversion of Emperor Constantine. However, Alexei II, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, may be making a play for preeminence within Orthodoxy. In a recent conversation, Metropolitan Meliton confirmed the competitive atmosphere and the Ecumenical Patriarchate's animosity toward more recent Russian machinations. END SUMMARY.

How Many Romes Are There?

12. (C) Being a student of Orthodox power politics is a little bit like watching a prize fight in slow-motion. Jabs and swings come only rarely, and there are plenty of breaks. The prize in question in this case is not a summit of religious authority, as with the Pope in Roman Catholicism, but a nod of pre-eminence from other Orthodox leaders. With this nod comes a certain ability to set the tone of discussions between Orthodoxy and the outside world, especially Western Christianity. However, changes come only slowly, and church concerns revolve around events in the distant future.

13. (C) One of the central pillars of support to the Ecumenical Patriarch's claim to ecumenical status is location. As "Patriarch of Constantinople and New Rome," he can trace authority back to the Apostle Andrew and leadership of the city where Christianity first became legalized within the Roman Empire under Constantine, and later the state religion. Demography and Turkish law are working against the Ecumenical Patriarch's status in "The Second Rome," however. The Greek Orthodox citizens of Turkey (from whom a new Patriarch must be chosen) now number only 3,000. For the Patriarchate to continue beyond one or two more patriarchs after Bartholomew II, Turkish law regarding Lausanne Treaty minorities will have to change, allowing leadership by non-Turkish citizens. This seems unlikely to happen.

14. (C) There is a Third Rome, though. Moscow claims that, prior to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the torch was passed to it to take up leadership within Orthodoxy, when the tsar was given the Cap of Monomakh. Tenuous though the claim

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may be, it allowed the Romanov tsars to claim the title of "Protector of the Orthodox Faith," a position which played into Russia's involvement in the First World War, and the Romanov dynasty's demise.

Don't Write to My Bishop!

15. (C) The most recent round of maneuvering began with a letter from Russian Patriarch Alexei II to several Orthodox leaders in Western Europe. Under Orthodox canon law, a Patriarch of a national church is confined to communicating directly on with bishops and priests under his on authority. The Ecumenical Patriarchate provided poloff with a letter from Alexei to, among others, "His Grace, the Right Reverend Gabriel, Bishop of Komansk, Locum Tenens of the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Parishes in Western Europe," and four other church leaders the Ecumenical Patriarch claims as his own.

16. (C) In the letter, Alexei lays out the reasons that he does not consider the Russian Orthodox Church in Western

Europe to be subordinate to Constantinople. He cites a 1931 letter from Photius, then Ecumenical Patriarch, who he argues foresaw only temporary subordination of the Russian Exarchate in Western Europe to Constantinople "until, God willing, unity and the unbroken image of the Holy Sister Russian Church are restored." Alexei now argues that that time has come.

17. (C) Moreover, Alexei's letter lays out a new proposal for a single Metropolitan for the Russian Church in Western Europe. Unlike the current Orthodox leaders in Western Europe, who are appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch, he argues that local leaders should be elected from among local clergy, and confirmed by Moscow. Thus, Alexei holds out the prospect of greater autonomy, tied to his own authority.

More Churches, Please

18. (C) On a recent trip to Moscow, Metropolitan Meliton of Philadelphia (Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod) said the Russians made a further request: four churches in Istanbul. Currently, the Russian Orthodox Church provides priests to serve in a church owned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. However, they argue, their need has grown, and more churches are required. Rather than just working as guests on Ecumenical Patriarchate property, they have requested that ownership be transferred to them. Meliton said he denied their request, but offered to expand the number of Russian Orthodox priests allowed to serve the flock in Istanbul.

"Political, Not Spiritual"

19. (C) Meliton said that in the wake of the collapse of communism, the Russian Orthodox Church was badly discredited, not least among their Orthodox co-religionists. While he recalls in the past working with Russian prelates who were focused on spiritual concerns, he feels that picture has changed. Now, he says, "Alexei and his bishops are all former KGB informants, who still work closely with the FSB and are far more political than spiritual in nature." Meliton says he and the Patriarchate view Russian Orthodoxy with great suspicion, and believe that it is deeply entangled in the political needs of the Russian state.

COMMENT

110. (C) Although not unheard of, it is rare for Turkish political analysts or commentators to grasp that GOT acceptance of the ecumenical nature of the Patriarchate in Istanbul and facilitation of the Patriarchate's ability to continue would accrue foreign policy benefits to Turkey. In this regard we will continue to pay close attention to the attitude toward the Patriarchate of Turkish "Eurasianists" -- i.e., those in the military, MFA, think tanks and business world who advocate closer ties to Russia as an alternative to Turkey's U.S/EU orientation.

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